Title: Tagore's Search for an 'Integral Life' in His Early Plays (1880-1900)

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Synopsis

Rabindranath Tagore wrote plays to propagate certain ideas, which had a close relation with his philosophy of life. Although he was not fully clear about his world view in his early plays, he was certainly close to a pattern of thought which embraces all life. He never spoke about 'Integral Life' directly, but would definitely explain it in his later life. In the essay named, "The Centre of Indian Culture", he would mention the integrality of life while discussing the relation between the education and our life:

> … our education should be in full touch with our complete life, economical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual; and our educational institutions should be in the very heart of our society, connected with it by the living bonds of varied co-operations. For true education is to realize at every stephow our training and knowledge have organic connections with our surroundings. (Tagore 469)

Not only once, Rabindranath went on to discuss that particular issue again and again in his essay. His concept of integral life spanned from spirituality to mundane, from above to the lower strata of life, in a word it engulfs every aspect of our life:

> Our ancient *tapovanas*, or forest schools, which were our natural universities, were not shut off from the daily life of the people. Masters and students gathered fruit and fuel, and took their cattle out to graze, supporting themselves by the work of their own hands. Spiritual education was a part of the spiritual life itself, which comprehended all life. Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of our economic life also. I must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloths, press oil from oil seeds; it must produce all the necessaries devising the best means, using the best materials, and calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and the villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will also give us a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit.(Tagore 568)

Although, probably for the first time we hear about the very concept of the integral life from an ancient Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD), who was a prolific philosopher of his

time besides being a great ruler. In his *Meditations* he formulated this very concept. Spirituality was in blood of Rabindranath from his childhood days. In *Prabhat Sangit (*1883), he expressed his passion for the Divine and the plays of the period were engaged in mundane problems. He was feeling in those early years that his brand of spirituality would embrace all the problems of material life. Sisirkumar Ghose places *Prakitir Protisodh* (1884) or the *Ascetic* at the centre of Rabindranath's basic idea of integrating matter and spirit. Going against the monk cult in the *Ascetic*, Tagore is virtually standing in favour of the Rishi-cult, which embraces all life in an effort to discover the All-Beautiful in this material world. According to Sri Aurobindo, the Rishi has a full knowledge of this mundane life and he is a connector between the material and the spiritual. Rabindranath accepted this ideal early in his life and the *Ascetic* he indicated his life-long stance. At the later stage of this play the Sanyasi also realized the fact that higher truth could not be perceived without facing mundane life. When Sri Aurobindo said, "Tagore has been a wayfarer towards the same goal as ours in his own way," he deliberately avoided the question of Tagore's spiritual status (Ghose *On Himself* 346). But then, very interestingly Nolini Kanta Gupta places his status in between man and the Rishi (Gupta *Collected Works* 88).

Rabindranath entered into serious problems of life in his early plays like *Sacrifice*, *Malini* and *Chitrangada.* These plays were efforts of a half-grown Rishi to know life, its many-branching facets, its tussles, joys and agonies. While in *Raja O Rani* (*The King and The Queen*) the duel between love and duty puts on a Shakespearean colour resulting in contrasts, intrigues, and violence, the next play, *Visarjan* (*Sacrifice, 1890*), intensifies the earlier conflicts. And the dramatist's stance becomes clear in the words Jaising:

> JAISING. Aparna, they drive you away from the temple; yet you come back over and over again. For you are true, and truth cannot be banished. We enshrine falsehood in our temple with all devotion; yet she is never there. Leave me not, Aparna. Sit here by my side. Why are you so sad, my darling?Do youmiss someGod. Who is God no longer? But is there any need of God in this little world of ours? Let us be fearlessly Godless and come closer to each other. They want our blood. And for this, they have come down to the dust of our earth, leaving their magnificence of heaven. For in their heaven there are no men, no creatures, who can suffer. No, my girl, there is no Goddess. (Tagore 103-04)

Sri Aurobindo would have called it religionism (SABCL, vol.15, 166) the worst aspect of religion. Tagore's voice against religion becomes clear again in *Malini* (1896), as Supriya says to Kemankar.

> SUPRIYA. Friend, you are right. My faith has come to me perfected in the form of that woman. Your sacred books were dumb to me. I have read by the help of the light of these eyes, the ancient book of creation, and I have known that true faith is there, where there is man, where there is love. It comes from the mother in her devotion, and it goes back to her from her child. It descends in the gift of a giver and it appears in the heart of him who takes it.I accepted the bond of this

> faith which reveals the infinite in man, when I set my eyes upon that face full of light and love and peace of hidden wisdom. (Tagore 84)

The character of Chitrangada, which was first created in 1892, shows Tagore's rare insight into the feminine psyche. The Rishi knows women better than a womanizer. Arjuna is perplexed at the start but realizes the truth later.

In all, these early plays indicate Tagore's effort to know life as a whole. The poet in the playwright wishes to taste all the flavours of life, the bitter, the sour, the astringent and the sweet. In these twenty years between 1880 and 1900, his poetry was already revealing a foretaste of the Divine. Curiously enough, his plays written during this period speak of his search for a complete life through contraries.

The purpose of the study would be to seek for his varied explorations in the early plays in search of an integral life. How often Tagore would say in his later life that no experience was irrelevant in his quest for the Infinite! The subjectivised mode gives him an opportunity to discuss various human problems in this early plays, the problems he wished to solve. Like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath did know early in his life that all problems of existence are essentially the problems of harmony. Plays, like the *Ascetic*, offer promissory hints at Tagore's mature philosophy, which holds the mirror of integral philosophy. Even the mysticism of the English *Gitanjali* seeks to embrace all life to realize the Divine in the material life, in our mundane existence. The clue to this integrality comes from the Upanishads, as in the Katha Upanishad, we listen to a relevant speech from Yama in the second cycle of the first chapter: "What is in this world, is also in the other: and what is in the other, that again is in this" (Ghose Upanishads 256). The idea of the new mysticism and the new spirituality originates from this vision of wholeness, which can only be perceived through the filth and mire of this earth, and not by trying to climb to another world through a smooth bypass.

Here is a tentative chapter division of the proposed thesis:
Chapter-1: Introduction: The Meaning of Integral Life
Chapter-2: *Valmiki Pratibha*: Transformation of Consciousness
Chapter-3: Religion vs Religionism in *Sacrifice*
Chapter-4: *The King and the Queen*: The Concept of Integral Life
Chapter-5: *Malini*: Clash of Two Religions
Chapter-6: *Chitra*: The Evolving Ideology of Tagore
Chapter-7: The *Ascetic*: The Monk-cult vs Rishi-cult
Chapter-8: Conclusion – Problem Plays and The Search for Harmony (1880-1900)

It is permissible now to compare Tagore's plays of ideas with his later non-fiction. The word "Search" in the title of the research proposal indicates Tagore's struggle for a mature perception in these early plays. They lack the wisdom that we see in Tagore's later treatises like *Sadhana* and *Creative Unity*.

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